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GUEST EDITORIAL

SGL Cruise: A Family Affair

Craig Washington

Four years ago, I received a community service award from the organizers of Indigenous House, one of the city's biggest outdoor house music parties. I am grateful to have been given my roses while I breathe, a rarity among black gay men of my generation or older and no less deserving. In addition to a lovely crystal trophy, I was given free admission to the first SGL (Same Gender Loving) Family Cruise. As an underpaid AIDS field dinosaur, I immediately assessed the monetary value of the ticket for an excursion that I could not have afforded. It would take years to appreciate the gift's real worth.

Life partners Keith Sibley and Mark Elliott are the founding organizers for SGLFC. In 2011, they started joining friends for restorative getaways in Ellijay, GA. They wanted to extend the intimacy to others through a cruise. "We got 85 folks all by word-of-mouth," Keith recalls. There was no internet. You had to talk to someone. It was real old school." Mark came up with the name. "I thought SGL would fit in for everybody," he says. "It was also a way of not having to use the word 'gay' or 'homosexual.' 'Same gender loving' is an identifier adopted by same sex attracted black men who desired a self-determined term and regarded 'gay' and 'queer' as Eurocentric and incompatible with their cultural locations."

From the onset, the pair invited those who were not cisgender black gay men. They regarded black LGBTQ friends who include heterosexual, other people of color, and white people in their closest circles. Keith pointed out, "There are straight and other people who love us. As long as you come with an open heart and mind, you are welcome."

With over 30 years' experience as a professional entertainer, Keith is a natural host. He emcees most of the activities and performs in and out of drag. Not quite the extrovert, Mark is a meticulous planner who covers logistics and pre-event communication. Every year, the pair take the 10-hour drive to Miami "loaded like the Clampetts" to lay the setting for countless memories.

From the cruise port hotel dinner to the closing wrap-up session, they are constantly on. Evening activities after port stops or a laidback day at sea keep members connected outside of their cliques. A unforced camaraderie grows through the in-between moments on deck or some serene shore. First timers are shown the ropes by recurring members. There is a shared sense of responsibility for everyone's experience.

Mainstays include a very festive Family Feud, a dance party featuring DJ Ron Pullman, and the "Keith and Friends" showcase hosted by luminaries Miss Sophia McIntosh and Neisha Dupree. Performers donate their cash tips to designated nonprofits like Southern Unity Movement (organizers of the Rustin-Lorde Breakfast).

On that last night at sea the "Let's Talk About It" discussion solicits spoken feedback while the experience is still fresh. A procession of cheers, recommendations, and complaints flows. At one such debrief, a performer thanked the group for the affection she and other trans women received. She noted that she rarely felt such warmth in Atlanta unless she was on stage. Another member spoke about the friends she lost in the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, expressing gratitude for the new friends she met on the ship.

Keith and Mark recognize the measure of what they created. "This is a missionary," Mark concluded. "We've had people tell us, if it wasn't for us, they probably wouldn't be here. When we get frustrated, we think about them."

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"Hearts Beat Loud" misses the plot in the best way

Jim Farmer

With only a handful of feature films behind him, Brett Haley has become a director known for his warmth and compassion toward his characters. His new "Hearts Beat Loud" – complete with a terrific lesbian relationship — is no exception.

In the film, opening in Atlanta this weekend, Nick Offerman stars as Frank Fisher, who owns a record store that's perilously close to shutting down. His daughter Sam (Kiersey Clemons), who lost her mother at a young age, is about to go off to college and has started to date Rose (Sasha Lane). Frank's dream has been for him and Sam to be in a band together one day and they unexpectedly become a songwriting duo before Sam heads off to college.

Lane came out recently and joins Clemons as two out, prominent women of color in the industry. Both Haley and Clemons were at the recent Atlanta Film Festival to screen the film. Haley admits he has made it a point as a director to focus on character.

"I think I am character over plot," he admits. "Plot is pointless a lot of the time. It's really about what your characters are doing, how they are feeling and what is going on with them, and how you make the audience care about them. You want to like them or understand or see their struggles."

One thing that drew Clemons to the role is the convincing father-daughter bond. "Sam is in this place where, once you get to the age she's at, you don't blame your parents for how you are, but you look at your childhood and parents and see how they had an effect on you," she says. "Her dad is going through the same thing. She is about to leave him and go off to college. He is in that same headspace. He has leaned on her a lot more than he thinks he has. They have raised each other. They are a great reflection of each other."

Haley feels the two women — the older Rose, who is an artist and living in a grey area, and Sam, younger yet more stable and structured — balance each other out. "Kiersey and Sasha, their performances are so genuine," he says. "I think people love their story. They are so connected. It's not an issue, a plot point. It's not meant to be. It just is. There is power in that."

The relationship is presented matter of factly. Refreshingly, Frank doesn't make a big deal out of the daughter's girlfriend. "In general, we are moving into a world where sexuality and gender and race need to be less of a concern to people," says Haley. "We should not have a concern about what someone does in their bedroom as long as it's consensual and safe. We should not have concern about what color someone's skin color is, what gender they identify as. It doesn't harm anybody. It's such an issue in this country – and in the world for so long. We are all different and weird and screwed up."

To make Sam's sexuality something that would separate her from her father would be ridiculous, says Clemons. "Their whole life has been this way," she says. "I've read YouTube comments (about the father and daughter) that say, 'This doesn't make sense. She's black and he's white.' And I say, 'That's insulting.' Are you saying my own life is ridiculous?"

DETAILS

"Hearts Beat Loud"
Opens June 22
Landmark Midtown Art Cinema and AMC Phipps Plaza
Landmarktheatres.com

RIP Anthony Bourdain: Eat Cheap, Be Strange

Cliff Bostock

Anthony Bourdain shocked the world when he hung himself a few weeks back. But fame, money, and brilliance — nothing, in fact — is a match for the curse of clinical depression. When it carries you to its darkest spaces, reason is extinguished. There is nothing but pain, which is as real as any crippling pain that can affect the body. You want to end the pain. Dying isn't the point.

Bourdain was a strange character and had a sense of humor, so I don't think he'd mind my saying that we both took the only antidepressant that works: Popeyes fried chicken. I have loved it for most of the 30 years I've reviewed food. I confess I enjoyed annoying foodies by frequently chronicling my experience at the Popeyes on Boulevard in Midtown, where the service is comically awful.

The super-crunchy, spicy fried chicken is best accompanied with red beans and rice that are seriously as good as you'll find at any "real" Cajun restaurant. The biscuits are fat, flaky, buttery, and love to be swabbed with honey. Try the mac and cheese. Bourdain loved it, but I find it pretty meh. You abdicate all rights to complain if you do not follow one rule: You must check your order before you leave, even if people are honking at you in the drive-through lane. They fuck up my order easily 25 percent of the time.

Bourdain's thing was exploring the link between food and culture and he knew that epic taste doesn't have to be expensive. Cheap eateries have always been my thing. Here are a few other recommendations:

EL REY DEL TACO

This place is great fun and is open really late. I won't lie: Despite the name — "king of the taco" — there are better tacos in the city, but El Rey has a huge menu that is great for people in the mood to experiment with authentic Mexican fare. Be careful with the grilled jalapenos. Merely licking one caused my friend Frank so much psychosomatic trauma that he has yet to heal after three years.
5258 Buford Hwy
ElReyDelTacoAtl.com

EATS

Eats makes everyone's list. The jerk chicken is better than you'll find at many Jamaican restaurants, and you get to pair it with yo' mama's veggies. I get the collards, black-eyed peas, and the whole sweet potato. There's also pasta.
600 Ponce de Leon
EatsOnPonce.net

LOTTAFRUTTA

This tiny Latin café is, duh, all about fruit – mixed in large cups, blended into smoothies, and tossed in salads. There are also fantastic sandwiches, including the city's best grilled-cheese. The owner is the descendant of Mexican orchard owners and a graphic designer. No, your fruit is not psychedelic. The place just really looks that way.
590 Auburn Ave
LottaFrutta.com

MASTERPIECE

Chef Liu Ri's restaurant is worth a drive, wherever you live. He was quite famous in China and his sublime cuisine spans three regional styles, including spicy Sichuan. I have rarely tasted food — especially not at this low price — with so many layers of startling flavor. It's been over a year since I've visited, but I still yearn for that perfectly knifed block of pork belly in a dark sauce based on an earthy wine. Go!
3940 Buford Hwy

And, please, if you are suffering depression, find help. Talk to a therapist. Talk to a friend. Talk to a pastor. Call a hotline. If substance abuse is involved, go to AA or NA. (I'll convene a meeting at Popeyes.) If you are depressed and own a gun, I beg you: Give it to a friend for safekeeping.

Cliff Bostock is a former psychotherapist now specializing in life coaching. Contact him at 404-518-4415 or CliffBostock@gmail.com.

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